

Chief Solano's grave site is shrouded in mystery

By Nancy Dingler

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The year was 1934. The site was Rockville. Filled with historical interest, curiosity and excitement, people gathered from near and far. Some of Solano County's oldest living pioneers, dignitaries and school children had gathered for the unveiling of the 12-foot-high bronze statue of Chief Solano.

There had been a great resurgence and interest in Native Americans across the country. Residents of Solano County, particularly Fairfield-Suisun, had also been "bitten by the bug." These citizens did not have to look to Geronimo, Sitting Bull or Pontiac for heroic figures in Indian lore, they had a "hero" in their own back yard. Famous artisan, William Gordon Huff, was commissioned to create the statue that would be placed upon a stone pedestal, on a knoll, near where it was believed the chieftain was buried.

The statue was wrapped in white sheeting for the ceremony. At the proper time, Mr. Huff's masterpiece was unveiled, revealing to the delighted gathered throng, the mighty chieftain with his arm raised in friendly greeting. The statue stood on the planned site until 1938 when continuing vandalism prompted officials to move it to the grounds of the county library. The "old" library now houses county offices, but the chief's statue remains.

Long before the statue and ceremony, local historians had sought to find the grave of Chief Solano. The account of the chief's death was told by the Martin family, who were working the land near the site of the long-ago burned out home of the Suisun Indians. The famous stone house, "stonedene," still stands across Suisun Road from Solano Community College. Stonedene was the Martin homestead.

Solano had left the area in 1846 right after the Bear-Flag revolt, in which his friend General Mariano Vallejo was taken captive. Vallejo had encouraged the takeover by the Americans, but evidently did not include Solano in the ruse. Approximately 10 years later, the old chief, who by then was around 50 years old, upon learning that his friend had not been killed that day, returned to Sonoma.

Platon Vallejo, Mariano's son and a physician, wrote an account of the occasion of Solano's return. The Vallejo family was delighted to have him back, including Solano's wife, Isadora and his children. Isadora had been working for the Vallejos. Solano remained for an extended visit before insisting on going back to his childhood home,

Yulyul, which is now Rockville Park.

Yulyul had been destroyed by the Spanish in 1810, under the command of Lt. Gabriel Moraga during an expedition of exploration and conquest.

When Solano appeared at the Martins, they tell a story of how, upon his arrival at Yulyul, the chief suddenly developed pneumonia and died, in spite of their trying to take care of him. They further explained how they had buried the old chief under a cairn of stones, near a Buckeye tree, alongside the road. However, the grave was lost in the natural course of farming.

In the 1930s, considerable effort was made trying to locate the chief's grave. This was a time before DNA or modern forensic practices; still it was common knowledge - well documented, that the chief stood 6 foot, 7 inches tall. Finding a skeleton of that stature would certainly be enough to identify the remains. Several Indian graves were dug up in the area, but there never was a satisfactory conclusion that the proper grave was found. However, according to local historian, M. Clyde Low, the grave is on the campus of Solano Community College.

Wherever the grave, or whatever the circumstances of Chief Solano's death, the facts remain that he was a very important personality in the "taming" and settling of the area. General Vallejo thought so highly of his friend that he insisted the new county bear his name - Solano.

When the local citizenry, years later, wished to do honor as well, they turned to the writings of General Vallejo. A bronze tablet was engraved with the words of tribute, then fastened onto the face of the stone emplacement that supported Huff's statue. This bronze tablet is long gone, but Vallejo's sentiment about his friend can still be found in local history books and stories:

"To the bravery and in particular to the diplomacy of that great chieftain of the Suisun Indians, civilization is indeed indebted for the conquest of the territory which today comprises the counties of Solano, Napa, Sonoma and Lake."—General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo.

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